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ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

EQUALITY OF THE SEXES IN NEW CHILDREN'S FICTION

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A study of 657 reviews of children's fiction published in 1975 and 1976 revealed information to show that writers and publishers of children's fiction are moving close to equality in treatment of the sexes. It was concluded from the survey of books reviewed in Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books that female and male protagonists are appearing in nearly equal numbers, that they are displaying similar personality traits, with the exception of a larger representation of females with physical impairments than males, and the number of female authors of fiction is increasing.

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EQUALITY OF THE SEXES IN NEW CHILDREN'S FICTION

"... books about boys so far outnumber books about girls that trying to review them as well would place an impossible burden on us." (Feminists on Children's Media, 1974)

"... there has been a steady decrease of illustrated books written for or about girls... From 1956 to 1960 the percentage of girls pictured in the survey books was 41 percent, whereas the percentage from 1966 to 1970 had shrunk to 26 percent." (Kathy De Filippo, 1976)

"... an extensive search of the literature available indicates a preponderance of books that have males in dominant, creative roles while girls are relegated to dolls and demureness." (Renee Queen, 1975)

"... it might be safe to say that authorship in Children's Literature shows a kind of equality between the sexes." (Lee Ann Rinsky, 1973)

Are these anachronisms? How close are we now to equality of the sexes in children's fiction? A look at children's trade books published in 1975 and 1976 reveals some answers.

Because the issue of sexism has been a lively one during the past decade, I decided recently to check our progress toward equality of the sexes in children's fiction by examining current publications. My survey involved the 657 books of fiction for children reviewed in Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books during 1975 and 1976. The reviews of all children's fiction included in this source were read. The reading of a second review of each book from another reviewing source (usually The Horn Book or The Booklist) followed, and answers to these questions were recorded for each book:

(1) Is the protagonist male or female?

(2) What one characteristic best describes the protagonist?

(3) Is the writer male or female?

The study provided interesting data related to each question:

(1) The protagonist in 331 of the books was female; the protagonist in 342 of the books was male. The difference in percentages of heroes and heroines was slight: male --50.8 percent and female --49.2 percent. When the 50-50 criterion was applied as an indicator of equality, the difference was of no significance.

(2) When one descriptor was arbitrarily assigned to the predominant trait of each protagonist, a summary of the recorded data showed these characteristics:

POSITIVE TRAITS	M	F	NEGATIVE TRAITS	M	F
Athletic	24	18	Obese	0	4
Capable	25	28	Stuttering	1	4
Clever	27	25	Deaf; Hard of Hearing	0	5
Courageous	43	28	Blind; Poor Eyesight	2	0
Investigative	26	23	Physically Malformed	4	2
Maturing	40	41	Chronically Ill	0	5
Friendly	8	12	Uncoordinated	2	2
Ambitious	6	9	Rebellious	5	1
Self-reliant	20	19	Jealous	3	2
Caring	18	25	Shy	1	4
Imaginative	21	11	Bungling	2	1
Artistic	16	10	Foolish	3	6
Adventurous	40	41	Mentally Disturbed	4	5
Total	314	290	Total	27	41

An examination of the list of positive characteristics showed that male and female protagonists are being portrayed with similar traits in the new fiction. Having noticed that the most substantial difference in numbers (15) between the sexes occurred with the descriptor "courageous," I determined the importance of this difference by comparing the percent of the total for males (6.4 percent) with the percent of the total for females (4.1 percent), and found that 2.3 percent more males than females were presented as "courageous." It seemed reasonable to require a difference above the 5 percent chance level

for judging the difference a significant one, and I concluded, therefore, that there were no important differences in numbers of males and females with positive characteristics in the books reviewed.

While the list of negative characteristics included a variety of physical and mental qualities, the numbers of either sex included in any of the categories were small. The differences between the sexes were minimal when considered within the context of the total number of books reviewed. An interesting comparison was made with the data on physical characteristics, however. In the first seven categories of negative characteristics, there were 31 protagonists with physical defects -- 9 males and 22 females. In terms of percentages, 71 percent of the protagonists with physical defects were girls and only 29 percent were boys. Whether this is an important difference, in view of the paucity of protagonists having physical defects, is a moot question. It seems equally questionable to judge the 40 percent male -- 60 percent female negative characteristic ratio important, in view of the fact that only 68 protagonists in total were given a negative descriptor.

(3) Female writers produced 419 of the new books of fiction for children, while male writers contributed 229. (In 25 cases, a foreign name or initials in lieu of a name made it impossible to determine the sex of the writer.) In terms of percentages, 65 percent of the new books were written by women, and 35 percent by men.

How close are we to equality of the sexes in children's fiction in 1977? We can conclude from this survey that the differences in treatment of the sexes are slight. The writers and publishers of children's fiction are equalizing male and female roles in these ways:

(1) Female heroines are appearing almost as often as male heroes in the new children's fiction.

(2) Female and male protagonists are displaying similar personality traits, with the males holding a slight edge on the quality of "courage."

(3) There is a slightly larger representation of female protagonists with negative characteristics, most of which are physical impairments, but the total number of both sexes portrayed negatively is small.

(4) The number of female writers of children's fiction has increased approximately 8 percent since 1973, from 43 percent male -- 57 percent female (Lee Ann Rinsky, 1973) to 35 percent male -- 65 percent female. As Rinsky points out, since twice as many men as women illustrate books for children, and four times as many men as women write informational books, these figures may represent a kind of equality when put together.

According to this survey, it may be quite accurate to label the first three quotations at the outset of this article "anachronisms". The writers and publishers of children's fiction are obviously moving in the direction of equality of the sexes. Their progress presents a challenge to educators!

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